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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TALKING REFORM: EMBASSY CAIRO ORGANIZES IFTAR SEMINARS ON REFORM IN EGYPT

1. Summary: As part of ongoing efforts to support and encourage reform in Egypt, post funded and organized a series of iftar seminars during Ramadan. PA worked with members of the Al-Ahram Regional Press Institute to arrange three iftars from October 19 to October 30. The iftar seminars took place in Cairo and touched on media reform and privatization, economic reform, and democratic reform. Post's USAID director and the head of the Foreign Commercial Service spoke at two of the seminars, all of which were attended by Egyptian government officials, media figures, business leaders, and independents. Media coverage of all the three events was extensive. End summary.

2. Media reform: Post's Public Affairs section, working with the Al-Ahram Regional Press Institute, organized three iftar seminars from October 19 to October 30 in Cairo to support reform efforts in Egypt and encourage further dialog on reform. The first iftar seminar, entitled "The Future of the Press and Media Privatization Trends," took place on October 19. The first iftar seminar touched on media ownership and how it affects free expression and the public's access to information. Participants also discussed how media reform is a key element of broader political reforms. Egyptian government-controlled television was criticized harshly by most speakers. Participants engaged in a lively discussion on ways to downsize Egyptian TV (ETV) from its current level of 38,000 under-employed staff and make it more professional and profitable. Panelists included the editor of the popular weekly Sawt Al-Umma (circulation: 75,000); the editor of leading independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm (circulation: 20,000); the head of satellite channel Dream TV; and the director of ETV news.

3. Economic reform: Egyptian Minister of Investment Mahmoud Mohieldin was the featured speaker at the October 25 iftar seminar on economic reform, which focused mainly on privatization and the relationship between the government and private sector. The head of the Embassy's Foreign Commercial Service spoke on the challenges Egypt faces in privatization and encouraged the journalists present to educate the public on these challenges.

4. Democratic reform: Participants at the October 30 iftar seminar on democratic reform discussed the potential for "true" multi-party elections in Egypt and the impediments to that, the role of media in strengthening Egypt's electoral system, the role of ruling party and opposition groups, the representation of women and Copts in the upcoming elections, the issue of gradual transformation towards democracy, the need for additional constitutional change, and encouraging a "culture" of political participation in Egypt. The Director of USAID Egypt spoke on the media's role in supporting democracy and how the USG was assisting the Egyptian government and civil society groups on democratic reform. Osama Saraya, Editor-in-chief of leading pro-government daily Al-Ahram and a well-known reformer in the region attended and spoke, as did Nabil Zaki, the editor of opposition, Nasserite newspaper Al-Ahali. Hafez Abou Seda, the Secretary-General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, also spoke at the event.

5. Participation and media coverage: Attendance numbered between 50 and 75 guests for each iftar seminar. Among the attendees were university professors, business leaders, and journalists. Egyptian TV Channel One, Nile TV News, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Radio, and dozens of reporters from the Egyptian and pan-Arab print press covered all the three iftar seminars. Daily newspaper Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) gave extensive coverage to all three iftar seminars.

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